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Scaling Up Democracies with E-Collecting?

Uwe Serdült, Fernando Mendez, Maya Harris

Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA)

University of Zurich

Aarau, Switzerland

uwe.serdult@zda.uzh.ch

Hyeon Su Seo

School of Management - Politics

University of Tampere

Tampere, Finland

Hyeon.Su.Seo@staff.uta.fi

Abstract—In most advanced democracies there is a host of ancillary participatory instruments that operate “between elections”. The aim of such participatory instruments is to allow citizens to put new issues on the policy agenda. The range of so-called “between election” participatory instruments that are the focus of this paper can be grouped around three basic categories, the petition, the agenda initiative and the citizens' initiative. This paper deals mostly with the extent to which new technologies are used to enhance the functioning of the endorsement mechanism, so called e-collecting. Our core argument is that harnessing the full potential of the “e” dimension, especially the e-collecting aspect, will be conditional on two factors: (1) the specificity of the participatory instrument and (2) the institutionalization of the instrument, namely whether it is an established instrument or whether it is a recently introduced democratic innovation.

e-democracy; e-participation; e-petition; e-collection

I. INTRODUCTION, THEORY AND CONCEPTS

In most advanced democracies there is a host of ancillary participatory instruments that operate between elections”. The aim of such participatory instruments is to allow citizens to put new issues on the policy agenda. Not surprisingly, these instruments will vary in terms of their scope, their potential policy impact and the degree to which they are institutionalized. Such instruments have been the focus of increased academic interest around the topic of “democratic innovations” [12]. Yet, there is nothing inherently novel about such instruments. Indeed, such instruments have been used for centuries in some countries. What is novel is that with the advent of new technologies there has been a greater willingness to experiment by adding an “e” dimension to the functionality of these instruments.

The range of so-called “between election” participatory instruments that are the focus of this paper can be grouped around three basic categories, the petition, the agenda initiative and the citizen initiated referendum. All three instruments share two important features. First, these instruments aim to provide a channel for citizens to raise issues on the political agenda. Second, all three instruments derive their legitimacy from an endorsement mechanism whereby citizens signal their approval of the issue through their signatures. This paper deals mostly with the second aspect, the extent to which new technologies are used to enhance the functioning of the endorsement mechanism, so called e-collecting. Online technologies can dramatically enhance the scope for drawing attention to new policy issues by expanding the availability and diffusion of information. To this extent, they can surely help to raise citizens' awareness of issues that may concern them. But to what extent is the potential of web technologies used with regard to the endorsement function? After all, in most cases, this is the principal legitimating feature of the various instruments. Our core argument is that harnessing the full potential of the “e” dimension, especially the e-collecting aspect, will be conditional on two factors: (1) the specificity of the participatory instrument and (2) the institutionalization of the instrument, namely whether it is a well established instrument or whether it is a recently introduced democratic innovation.

We begin by noting some of the distinctions between the three instruments. One of the main differences is how they are procedurally regulated and their potential policy impact. These two aspects are linked such that the greater the potential policy impact the more likely a particular instrument will be more tightly regulated. This, in turn, is likely to condition the scope for e-collecting. In terms of potential direct policy impact, the three instruments can be placed on a continuum ranging from the weakest, a petition, to the intermediate agenda initiative, and through to the strongest instrument, the citizen initiated referendum or initiative. In the case of the citizen initiated referendum, it is the people that decide whether a particular policy proposal is implemented or not. In the case of the petition and the agenda initiatives, political elites have much greater discretion to decide upon whether to act or not. Petitions are usually very non-committal in terms of obligations and actions required from political elites [3]. With an agenda initiative, if the process has been deemed valid, the successful proposal is mediated by a representative body, such as a parliament or the executive, which decides whether or not to implement the

initiative [10]. The potential policy impact seems to play a role on the procedural regulation of a particular instrument. Generally, petitions typically involve few formal requirements for submitting and endorsing a proposal whereas citizens initiated referendums have rather strict criteria. The agenda initiative is more blurred, typically having quite strict criteria similar to the citizen initiated referendum even though its policy impact is in many cases quite limited.

Having distinguished between the various generic forms of participatory instruments, we now focus on the 'e' aspect. In what ways can web technologies enhance the legitimacy of a participatory instrument? As [3] has highlighted, participatory institutions can be evaluated in terms of three dimensions of legitimacy: what is known as input, throughput and output legitimacy. Broadly speaking, input legitimacy refers to the participatory quality of policy-making, whereas output legitimacy focusses on the problem-solving quality of the laws and rules [9]. Throughput legitimacy concentrates on the space between the input and the policy output stages by focusing on the quality and transparency of the governance processes. We can look at each in turn:

The input procedures we are concerned with are the rules governing two central aspects of participatory instruments. First how can issues be put on the agenda and second how can citizens endorse proposals that have been accepted as valid. Legitimacy can be enhanced to the extent that citizens become increasingly aware of the existence of the participatory instrument and are able to easily express their endorsement of a proposal. Procedural requirements can make a participatory tool more or less burdensome to the citizenry in terms of the ease with which they can put issues on the agenda and endorse them. These include questions such as who can submit a proposal and how. More importantly, the rules governing citizens' endorsement of an issue vary greatly. Allowing for e-collecting can dramatically increase the scope for signature gathering compared to offline versions requiring signatures and additional personal data such as national ID numbers.

Throughput procedures relate what occurs 'behind the scenes' once a proposal is submitted. Legitimacy can be enhanced to the extent that throughput procedures are perceived as fair and transparent. These include questions such as the grounds for acceptance or refusal of a proposal and how consistently those rules are applied. Whether decisions to refuse or remove proposals can be challenged. It also includes issues related to how endorsements or signatures are validated and tallied. As a general rule, the greater the potential policy impact the more likely there will be stringent rules, which may for instance lead to higher numbers of invalidated signatures. A relatively new feature that has accompanied some participatory instruments includes interactive mechanisms such as forums and crowd sourced expertise, for instance for legislation drafting. In short, behind the scenes governance can be a 'black box' where decisions are taken by closed committees of politicians or fully transparent including input mechanisms for citizens and experts to influence proposals through online platforms.

The output side relates to the policy impact of participatory institutions. Legitimacy is enhanced to the extent that a particular instrument is perceived as opening new channels of effective and responsive policy. Here the main question is what happens to proposals that satisfy the procedural criteria. To what extent can they lead to policy change? The most direct instrument is, of course, the citizen initiated referendum which leads to a popular vote in which the citizens themselves decide upon a proposed policy measure. However, it may be unfair to use such a benchmark, i.e. direct policy impact, where a particular institution has not been designed for such purposes. In this case, it is much more insightful to think of indirect effects, such as raising awareness of issues, public debate and potential media follow-up rather than an explicit policy change.

The 'e' component can evidently impact on the three dimensions of legitimacy. For instance, input legitimacy can be enhanced by making the whole process more open for public endorsement through e-collecting platforms; throughput can be improved with an online presence, more transparent publishing of rejections, forums, and where e-collecting is used usually a lower number of invalidated signatures; lastly output legitimacy could be enhanced through indirect mechanisms such as the greater scope for mobilization and media attention afforded by the new web technologies. Whether this happens, and the full 'e' potential is utilized, is likely to be contingent on two factors. Our core argument is that there is a classic (organizational) efficiency versus (institutional) legitimacy trade-off in relation to certain types of democratic institutions. This central mechanism can be stated as follows: enhancing the 'e' dimension leads to greater legitimacy but at the cost of less (organizational) efficiency. However, this effect is conditional on (1) the type of participatory instrument at stake and (2) its institutional legacy. This can be framed in terms of two working hypotheses.

1) The institutional absorption hypothesis: The greater the direct policy impact of an instrument, the less likely authorities will facilitate e-collecting mechanisms. The implication here is that citizen initiated referendums are less likely to be e-collecting friendly precisely because of their potential un-mediated policy impact. By contrast, participatory instruments that are mediated by authorities, as is the case with agenda initiative and petitions, are more likely to be 'e' friendly.

2) The institutional legacy hypothesis: The potential for enhancing the 'e' dimension is likely to be conditioned by institutional legacies. Where participatory instruments are introduced in the context of recent democratic innovation, these are more likely to be e-collecting friendly notwithstanding the potential policy impact of the instrument. In contexts where there is limited use of an instrument or it does not exist, and there are attempts to experiment with new forms of democratic innovation, there will be more possibilities for e-collection.

To probe the validity of these guiding hypotheses, rather than test them in a quantitative sense, we shall look at a number of cases. The selection of cases varies in terms of (i) the participatory instrument covered; (ii) whether the instrument has an institutional legacy and (iii) the nature of the political system in terms of its territorial organization (from supranational and federal polities to decentralized and unitary states). Given the word constraints we can only cover in vignette form some of the underlying dynamics at play rather than provide systematic assessments.

II. A SELECTION OF BEST PRACTICES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

A. *Germany – e-Collecting to Open Up Parliament*

In Germany an e-collecting system was introduced in the year 2005, first as a pilot, allowing for the digital submission and endorsement of a petition (according article 17 German Grundgesetz). The German e-petition was modeled according to the Scottish system [2] and can be considered to be one of the earliest of its kind worldwide. After a positive evaluation of the trials the system was continued in 2007 [4]. Until 2008 the German e-petition site still ran with the Scottish software [6]. Petitions can be submitted to an official website only, upon prior registration (verification via confirmation email) with name, address, email address and the observance of certain formal rules. Other registered users of the petition system can then sign and discuss the proposal in a forum. Signing is only possible on the official government website. The current system is online since September 2012 (see: <http://epetitionen.bundestag.de>). The petition is formally received by the petition committee of the parliament.

In Germany, a distinction is made between individual and public petitions, the latter can be submitted with the appropriate form on the parliament's official website. Name and email of the main petitioner will be published on the website. A public petition needs to fulfill a long list of criteria: it needs to be of general interest, it cannot target a person and parliament has to be competent in that matter. Furthermore, the petition needs to be well formulated, in German, factual and be accompanied with a justification. In addition, it cannot be directed against human rights, and not be utterly wrong, insulting, against public morale, ask for violent or criminal action. However, every petition – whether public or not – will receive a response by the authorities. Apparently, there is a staff of 80 people in charge of handling petitions for the parliamentary petitions committee. With 50'000 signatures within four weeks the petition can go public and eventually there will be a public debate in the petition committee. Citizenship or residency are not required in order to submit or sign a petition. In case the petition is accepted as public, the petitioner is invited to participate in a session and speak in front of the committee. However, the petition committee can by a two third majority also decide against a public debate despite a reached threshold. The petition committee can also decide to have a public debate if the threshold is not reached. Offline supporters can be handed in on lists via post or fax (needs name, address and signature). Signatures collected on other portals cannot be used. Since May 2014 there is a secure e-ID option available for holders of the new German passport. The use of this option is however not mandatory. Instead of a petitioner entering personal data one is temporarily transferred to the provider of the electronic ID and would then return back to the e-petition site once authentication has taken place.

In general, e-petitions do not seem to have a direct influence on legislation. However, some issues raised by e-petitions managed to get wider media attention [4]. The most successful e-petitions led to a public debate in the media or to a parliamentary hearing.

B. *Australia – so far only subnational, tightly tied to parliamentary system*

Another early adopter of e-collecting systems – but only on the sub-national level - is Australia where three out of six states allow for the collection of signatures for petitions online. Queensland was the first to introduce e-petitions, in 2003, and is the most advanced case [8]. While currently petitions at the Federal level must be on paper with original handwritten signatures, the Petitions Committee has communicated that it intends to review this policy.

In terms of input, the procedure for submitting an e-petition is simple. Signatories of Queensland e-petitions must provide their name, address (including postcode) and an email address. There is a safeguard system with unique IDs in order to prevent people mass-joining e-petitions with an automatic submission. An e-petition must contain at least one signature and the collection period is defined by the principal petitioner (must be between one week and six months). An e-petition must be sponsored by a Member of Parliament (MP) before signature collection begins. The MP provides the Clerk with the details of the petition in the correct form and a signed acknowledgement that they are prepared to sponsor the e-petition. The MP or Clerk may request changes to the e-petition request before agreeing to sponsor it.

The validity of petitions is not officially checked. Names and signatures are not checked either, in the same way that hard copy petitions are not checked unless a problem is reported. The principal petitioner is not able to publish additional information on the issue online and there is also no online discussion forum. Parliament does not promote the e-petition in any way but rather merely facilitates the petition process. It is the responsibility of the principal petitioner to raise awareness of their petition [8]. Responses are published on the e-petitions website. The process has been designed to be as automated as possible, including the joining of an e-petition, running tally of signatories, closure of e-petition, deleting personal information. Personal details of petitioners are not published on the website, rather only a tally of the number of signatures collected is shown. The Clerk must dispose of all electronic personal data related to the posting and joining of an e-petition within six months after an electronic petition is printed and presented to the Assembly. In terms of output, e-petitions do not trigger any obligations within parliament. The petition is sent to the Minister responsible for the administration of the matter which is the subject of the petition. Nevertheless, since its introduction in Queensland there have been more than 800 e-petitions. In the other territories the e-petition is much less used. However, in Queensland it has been possible to identify some examples of indirect policy consequences.

C. European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) – e-Collecting on the Supranational Level

The European citizens' initiative (ECI) was launched in mid-2012. Requiring "not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of Member States", it allows EU citizens to submit a proposal for a legislative act within the framework of the European Commission's powers. Its uniqueness stems from being the first instrument of direct democracy at the supranational level.

In terms of the input dimension, the ECI is a comparatively complex procedure. In addition to the 1 million signature threshold it includes certain regional criteria, namely that support must be from at least seven out of 28 EU member states. For each member state, a quorum (minimal number of signatures) has been defined. The process is open to all citizens allowed to vote in European Parliament elections. Apart from Austria where the voting age is 16, all other European member states require a minimal voting age of 18. Another requirement that reflects its supranational spirit, is that a citizens' committee must be formed with a minimum of seven members residing in at least seven different member states. Once the citizens' committee has been formed, a request for an initiative can be registered with the European Commission.

If successfully registered, the initiative enters the signature gathering process. This is one of the most challenging stages given the variability of rules across the member states. Particularly problematic for online signature collection is the variability in rules governing personal data requirements. These can vary from minimal information in Finland (name, nationality and data of birth) to countries that, in addition to the basic information, require the signatories address, national ID card number and issuing authority. As the EP has acknowledged, such excessively burdensome personal data requirements [EP (2015) Implementation of the European Citizens Initiative] deter potential signatories, especially for online collection. For the moment no clear pattern has emerged regarding online signature gathering based on data available for the three successful initiatives to date. The average is close to 60 per cent of signatures collected online. However, this masks some large variability with more than 80 per cent of valid signatures collected online for the Right2Waterinitiative compared to 35 per cent for the One of Us initiative.

In terms of the throughput legitimacy, understood as the governing procedures between the input and policy output stages, a number of problems have emerged. Although there is a wealth of information available online about the procedures from, say the ECI's website, when it comes to the grounds for the refusal of initiatives there appears to be much less transparency. The Commission has been criticized for inconsistency regarding its grounds for declaring initiatives inadmissible. However, this is not an issue that directly relates to online signature collection. Regarding the latter, there have been "teething" problems with the online signature collection platform, mostly related to technical glitches. The regulations regarding the online collection are strict and organizers have used the Commission's online platform rather than develop their own system. In doing so numerous problems have been encountered, mostly related to system complexity and malfunctioning. The verification process has also been characterized by shortcomings. Given the divergence in member state data requirements, many signatures are invalidated as a result of missing mandatory data fields. Indeed, the EP has noted that one verification officer claimed that up to 20 per cent of collected online signatures run the risk of invalidation.

In relation to the ECI, output legitimacy can be understood in two broad senses. First the degree to which there is policy uptake following a successful signature gathering process. The constraints here are related to the nature of the instrument, which only requires the Commission to give serious consideration to a proposal but cannot oblige the Commission to initiate a legislative act. Thus, apart from a formal response to the three initiatives that have been successful to date no other policy action has been forthcoming. The second aspect is public awareness of the instrument. The latter could be especially important for boosting the potential for online signature gathering. A recent Eurobarometer survey confirms that, apart from Germany, there are high levels of unfamiliarity regarding the instrument.

D. Finland – Mixed Public and Private, Crowdsourced e-Collecting

The impact of the ECI in terms of a system of e-collecting can be observed in Finland. After a Constitutional reform in 2011, the Finnish Parliament (Eduskunta) legislated the Act of Citizens' Initiative, which entered into force on 1 March 2012. Section 53 of the Constitution provides "at least fifty thousand Finnish citizens entitled to vote have the right to submit an initiative for legislating an Act to the Parliament." With this agenda initiative, citizens can submit legislative agenda to the parliament with some amount of eligible signatures but the power to deliberate and decide it finally is reserved to the legislature. An initiative can be a form of specific legislative bill proposing to introduce a new law or to change or abolish existing laws. When the initiative is submitted, the Parliament has the responsibility to deal with it, but it can decide freely whether to approve, reject or change it; there is no forcible obligation for the parliamentary committees to deliberate it. However, it became a de facto norm that the committees would deliberate citizens' initiatives by holding expert hearings (including a public hearing in which the citizen initiators are invited to speak) and producing its report for the plenary debates.

For a citizens' initiative to be transferred to the Eduskunta, the Act requires 50'000 eligible signatures to be collected within 6 months after launching of initiative. The number of 50'000 corresponds to 1.2 % of the electorates in Finland. What is distinctive in the Finnish system of citizens' initiative is that it allows the signature gathering activities to be possible both on- and offline. In particular, the Act (Section 8) requires that an appropriate online network service based on the electronic identification be offered by the Ministry of Justice in order to facilitate e-collecting of signatures. On December 2012, the formal website for citizens' initiative (see: www.kansalaisaloite.fi) operated by the Ministry of Justice was opened, in which any Finnish citizens with the right to vote can register their legislative agenda as the form of citizens' initiative quite easily.

After establishment, the website has functioned as the basic online platform for citizens to get relevant information, launch legislative initiatives, and also give and collect e-signatures.

It is notable that in addition to the above formal website, other online platforms are allowed as long as they meet certain criteria and certified by the responsible authorities. In fact, a ‘crowdsourcing legislation’ platform of ‘Open Ministry’ (Avoim Ministeriö, www.avoinministerio.fi) had carried the similar function before the formal website began to be operated by the Ministry of Justice. Managed by a volunteer-based NGO with no political party links, it offered a more dynamic online forum in which citizens could discuss and poll the proposals, and further develop them into legislative bills utilizing various crowdsourcing idea-making tools, which was distinctive from the above governmental website. Due to space restrictions we do not report on the in many respects functionally equivalent case of Latvia.

During its first legislature until 2015, around 370 initiatives have been launched; 11 initiatives have succeeded in collecting 50’000 signatures and 6 initiatives were treated by the Parliament before the election. Among them, one initiative for legal allowance of same-sex marriage in Finland succeeded in passing through the legislative process. Despite the rejection at the Legal Affairs Committee, the initiative was approved in the chamber of Eduskunta by votes (105 to 92; 101 to 90), which was assessed as ‘a historical decision’ in Finnish democracy [1]. Organized by a group of volunteers who performed active campaigns on- and offline, it gathered the largest number of signatures (166’851). The case also shows how quickly it is possible to reach 50’000 signatures using e-collecting: it gathered 50’000 signatures within 10 hours and 100’000 signatures within 24 hours after launching the initiative. On the other hand, five other initiatives submitted to the Parliament during the last parliamentary term were all rejected, but it is assessed that the citizens’ initiative institution has contributed to expanding public debates on a wide range of issues so far neglected by parliament.

E. Sweden – Local Level e-Collecting but not for Referendums

Sweden, unlike its neighbor Finland, has not introduced citizens’ initiative at the national level. This is perhaps not too surprising given the strong tradition of local self-government in Sweden – a unitary state that is much decentralized. Citizen initiated referendums exist at the local level and require signatures of 10 per cent of the electorate. Interestingly, e-collection of signatures is not allowed for citizen initiated referendums. There has, however, been experimentation with e-participation instruments at the local level. For example, several cities like Laxå, Malmö, Vara and Sigtuna have exercised a series of ‘online deliberative referendums’. Especially in the City of Sigtuna, which in 2007 held ten online referendums whose outcome was binding. As [13] assessed, “the results were generally encouraging: a relatively high percentage of citizens took part at some stage in these online referendums (between 30 % and 60 %), the socioeconomic characteristics of participants were fairly well balanced, and the contributions made by participants did have an impact on final policy decisions.” In addition, the British type of petition system (medborgarförslag) has been incorporated into the Local Government Act in 2002 while a handful of municipalities have also adopted e-petition systems (e-förslag or e-petitioner). In 2013, only 6 local governments among 290 were implementing e-petition systems – Malmö, Haparanda, Borås, Värmdö, Kinda and Uddevalla [13]. The latest survey shows that the number of municipalities adopting e-petitioning has tripled to 18. Nonetheless, it is still very small given that 206 municipalities are operating petition systems [7].

The city of Malmö presents the most salient case of e-petition system in Sweden at the local level and was the first to introduce this instrument in Sweden. The city established an online platform in which citizens and users could get practical information and guidance, launch and discuss initiatives, and collect signatures. Further, discussion of the suggested proposals is possible by linking up with the Facebook page of the Malmö Initiative. The threshold level of Malmö Initiative seems to be extremely low. According to the online guidance, all residents including children and youths as well as those affected by the municipal government’s activities can submit and sign the proposals. The procedure of launching and signing an e-petition is also very simple and open. Petitions can be easily made by filling the basic information such as a title, a brief description of the proposal with any forms of evidences, and the name and address of the initiator. Besides a simple registration and log-in process, no further authentication procedure is required. The contents of proposal are not restricted unless they are offensive or abusive. There is no time limit; the petitioner decides herself when to end e-collecting. When a proposal collects at least 100 signatures, a relevant committee of the City Council gives formal responses in documented forms, which are open to the public (see: http://initiativet.malmo.se/epetition_core).

In practice, 210 initiatives were launched and a total of 5’500 signatures were collected during the first 16 months of the implementation of e-petition. The very simple design of the institution with a lowest level of a threshold contributed to the higher number of initiatives launched, although its informal character probably weakened the motivations to endorse the initiatives [13]. To cover more its longer term development, we further analyzed the data on the webpages of Malmö e-petition. Between July 2008 and December 2015, 638 initiatives had been launched. The number of initiatives seems to have settled down to an average of around 85 initiatives per year while the signatures per an initiative have increased significantly. It appears that the Malmö e-petition initiative has stabilized as a new channel of public engagement in local democracy. Nonetheless, despite this relative success among several pioneer local authorities, the Swedish governments and municipalities still seem to be hesitating to introduce unconventional (online-based, direct and individualized) forms of citizen participation.

F. USA and Switzerland – Bottom Up Referendums but no e-Collecting

The USA and Switzerland are the two countries with the oldest traditions and the most frequent use of citizen initiated referendums. In the Swiss case the citizen initiated referendum (called a popular initiative) exists at all territorial levels, from the municipal level right through to the federal level. It allows citizens to put new issues on the agenda that can lead to a constitutional revision if the requisite signature gathering thresholds are satisfied. There are other institutions, such as the so-called optional referendum, that allow citizens to trigger a referendum after a successful signature gathering in order to reject a law that has been passed -within 100 days. In short, Swiss citizens have an array of bottom-up participatory instruments that can be used to trigger referendums that by-pass representative channels and lead to direct policy change, including constitutional revisions [5] at all levels of political authority. Apart from internet voting for referendums in some cantons [11], to date there has been no serious official attempt to introduce an 'e' component, such as e-collecting, into the Swiss system of direct democracy.

More than half of the US American states also have some degree of direct democracy mechanisms in their constitutions, which in principle could make use of e-collecting for their respective signature gathering procedures triggering a vote. Indeed, some US states, such as California and Oregon, have vibrant systems of direct democracy involving citizen initiated referendums. Unlike Switzerland there is no tradition of direct democracy at the federal level. But, whereas Switzerland has not yet looked into making use of e-collecting there is noticeable demand for upgrading the signature collecting via more efficient online means in several US states (see: https://ballotpedia.org/Electronic_petition_signature).

However, all states wanting to use e-collecting systems connected to referendum votes have thus far been blocked by the courts. As is typical of the US, there has been flurry of legal activity surrounding e-collecting as proponents and opponents have mobilized via the courts. Prominent cases include states such as Utah, California and Nebraska. Indeed, legislation has been enacted in some states such as Utah explicitly prohibiting e-collecting while the court in California clarified that a signature implies a physical signature, not an electronic one. In Tennessee the Election Commission has also prohibited e-collecting. These have all been states with instruments of direct democracy. Furthermore, at the state level we found no evidence of e-collecting being made available for petitions in the US, a weaker signature gathering instrument that does not trigger the potential for un-mediated policy change. There is one notable exception however at the Federal level. Launched by the Obama Administration in 2011, 'We the people' is an e-petition system that provides a platform for citizens to petition the US administration's policy experts (see: <https://petitions.whitehouse.gov>). The availability of such an instrument with a fully-fledged e-collecting system at the federal level, contrasts vividly with dynamics at the state level where no e-collecting is possible for petitions.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Our mapping exercise has suggested three clusters of cases that fit quite nicely with the working hypotheses outlined at the beginning of this paper. Starting with Finland, the case with the most advanced systems for e-collecting, we find self-reinforcing dynamics whereby the 'e' element is maximized on the input side in terms of a very open and user friendly e-collecting platform and, quite uniquely among the cases covered, innovation on the throughput side which makes use of the 'crowd' to mobilize expertise and deliberate the content of an agenda initiative. In terms of strengthening output legitimacy the Finnish case offers examples of substantive policy changes-which is rather rare for agenda initiatives while the indirect effects have contributed to expanding public debates. The Finnish case thus stands as a prototype where a new participatory instrument that can generate policy change has been introduced while taking full advantage of the 'e' component. It has counterparts in the EU such as Latvia, which due to space constraints we were not able to cover. A second group of cases (Australia and Germany) have implemented e-collecting systems to a petition system that is mainly direct at parliament. However, in these cases the MPs or parliamentary committees have rather more discretion about how this input is taken up. The EU's ECI could also be grouped in this category, although it is the Commission rather than the Parliament that has the right to initiate a legislative proposal. The last group, Switzerland and the US, is perhaps the most interesting. In these cases, where a vibrant tradition of direct democracy exists in which the citizens can actually by-pass representative channels there has been reluctance to introduce e-collecting. As postulated we do not find any political system which has far reaching instruments of direct democracy already in place to have implemented an e-collecting system (yet). The courts have denied e-collecting in the USA despite demand in some states and in some cases legislation has emerged to actually prohibit e-collecting, while Switzerland - the champion of direct democracy - has not seriously looked into e-collecting at all. Sweden also fits this grouping as it has explicitly ruled out the use of e-collecting for citizen initiated referendums at the local level, where such instruments exist. Instead, the US has implemented the weaker form of an e-petition at the federal level (where there is no tradition or mechanism of direct democracy), Sweden has implemented e-petition systems at the local level and Switzerland has focused on internet voting. These findings provide some tentative evidence suggesting a reluctance to experiment with 'e' collecting in systems with well-established institutions of direct democracy that have potentially direct policy impact. On the other hand, there is a greater willingness to experiment with the 'e' component where outcomes are subject to greater political control.

In future research we would seek to corroborate the identified pattern by a more complete, systematic, and eventually quantitative study of the described phenomenon which in our understanding has the potential to transform politics as we know it.

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